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AUTHOR Miller, Bernard A.
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ABSTRACT

The dialectic of pitting reality against the perception of reality has been a proclivity of philosophers since the days of Plato and Greek civilization. Most philosophers today regard the availability of a pure reality to be impossible. The world is as it appears to be: thinkers have no access to perfect truth. Accordingly, the matter of perspective is unsettled and elusive. Hermeneutics is the effort to raise exegesis to the level of an art by which interpreters can get at the meaning of a text under such circumstances. The aims of discourse have most often been integral to rhetorical theory. The commitment to a subjective ego constitutes the basis of not only the aims of discourse but also the process of communication. This view conceives of language as a tool. Such traditional notions of rhetoric are at odds with today's hermeneutical imperative, which contemplates an interaction between subject and object, or interpreter and interpreted. In short, knowers are what they know; humans are their perspectives. This concept has had tremendous influence among rhetorical theorists. Since thinking is being, and since language attests to this fact, language, rather than humans, speaks. In practical terms assignments in discursive prose (such as argumentation and research papers) contribute as much to achieving a vision of self-hood as do assignments in expressive writing. A close consideration of the Vietnamese word for village "Xa," shows that words have profoundly elaborate nuances grounded in being. A full sense of the play of language provides a sense of being that is authenticated only by virtue of being comprehended. (HB)

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ONTOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE AIMS OF DISCOURSE

Bernard A. Miller
Eastern Michigan University

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Nietzsche says that the will to truth is the essential prejudice of philosophers. If the statement begs the question of its own truth, it is nevertheless the case that the practice of making distinctions between the real world and how the world merely appears from particular perspectives has been a proclivity of philosophers since Plato. And often the matter can be as compelling for the rest of us. When I drive to campus looking for a parking place, I am continually beset by the recklessness of pedestrians who gather in hordes at intersections, edging their way into traffic, and others who line the boulevards and singly or in groups of two or three scurry across the roadways. Yet, once I am parked and become a pedestrian myself, I am no less beset by the recklessness of drivers as I join the hordes, seeking some sense of safety in that, and otherwise dart out in front of traffic to cross streets that seem always to require grave risks to be crossed at all. In the relative calm and routine of the office and classroom I reflect upon averted tragedies, coming to terms on the most practical level with the prime ingredient of deconstruction, hermeneutics, and the entire poststructuralist enterprise: namely, that a "pure reality" is impossible to come by, and all things are inevitably matters of perspective as a result.

To be sure, if I ever suffer some misadventure and am run down bolting off to class, it would seem that I--or someone in my behalf--would likely be able to speak of this particular issue with more certainty than mere

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perspective would allow. But just as likely not. If there is, in and of itself, some determinate fact of this or any other matter in the world, I am not sure that we can ever know it. As far as I am aware, there have never been any serious injuries associated with campus traffic, perhaps there never will be, and even if tragedy should one day strike, the issue of the danger of the situation would continue to remain open to perspective, to say nothing of who might be at fault for it. The world is as it appears to be, and whatever possibly exists beyond appearances is, in particular, open to perspective. In the end, there is no region of pure and perfect truth to which we have access, even though, under any given set of circumstances, some perspectives might be more viable, or probable, than others.

Accordingly, the matter of perspective is even more unsettled than the above illustration indicates. Not only do we abandon traditional notions of reality, but, as we do so, we abandon traditional notions of the self, for in the hermeneutical experience it is impossible to ultimately distinguish thinking from being. In this manner we thereby participate in reality, but in wisdom as ancient as the pre-Socratics, thinking is one with being and we <u>are</u> our perspectives as a result, even as our perspectives are in constant flux. Nothing is presupposed in this process, neither the world nor ourselves, save for the interaction between them--and that interaction, according to the hermeneutical experience, is but language, inhering in all cases as our relationship with the world. And here, we can assume to be as definite and rigorously exact as any notion of art will allow. As Paul Ricoeur says, modern hermeneutics is the result of efforts to raise exegesis to the level of a <u>kunstlehre</u>, an art or <u>techne</u> embracing systematic procedures and principles to get at the meaning of a text (143). Insofar as this <u>techne</u> is grounded altogether in language, my point is that it is seriously at odds with

some of the critical features of techne associated with rhetoric. In this matter we are burdened with the legacy we acquire from Plato, for the issue turns on nothing less than the distinctions between rhetoric and logic that come about through the fixture of the dialectic--distinctions that are immediately apparent once the theoretical sanctions of the aims of discourse are examined.

Because rhetoric is a practical art, aims of discourse have most often been integral to rhetorical theory, and it would seem that the most conspicuous and complete of modern theories of discourse is James Kinneavy's. To determine the aims, he proceeds in the manner of a New Critic. We are directed to avoid the intentional fallacy, inasmuch as the author's intent is most likely unavailable to us; and we must avoid the affective fallacy, in that we cannot judge the aim of a discourse by its impact on readers. Thus, the aim of any discourse can only be found rooted in the discourse itself (49). In this way communication is a process that develops by virtue of speaker, listener, thing referred to, and linguistic material--which, in turn, designate the respective aims of expressive, persuasive, referential, and literary discourse.

It is significant that these aims are derived on the basis of an epistemology predating the New Criticism--indeed, one that in all critical respects is as vintage as Plato's dialectic. The mischief it occasions ends in severing the art of rhetoric from language itself, at best restricting language to a mere accessory of the dialectic and, at worst, degrading it to a shadow show of likenesses and images, giving rise to the dissembler's way of sham and deceit. This view is hinged not only to the metaphysics of Plato in general but more specifically, in the emphasis that Plato gives to the soul, to the part played by subjective consciousness in apprehending the world. To

be sure, Kinneavy claims that the phenomenology upon which his scheme is based is an "intersubjective nexus that integrates the other and the self into culture," but, he continues, its ultimate expression rests with the "reassertion of the importance of the individual." For that very reason he sees expressive discourse as "psychologically prior to all other uses of language" (396-7). Here there is quite literally no such thing as the phenomenal self, and, if there is, it is necessarily sustained by a pure ego, atman, or some such, where a particular essence of the self, detached and untainted by the here and now, precedes phenomenal reality given in language.

It is in this way that the commitment to the subjective ego constitutes the basis of not only the aims of discourse but the process of communication as such. In this techne, an inner unfolding of the mind, or dialectic, constitutes thought, and thought is separate from language, so that we put language to use at the behest of our thought, so that speaking itself, as Plato says in the Sophist, is essentially the translation of nonlinguistic meaning into the sound of words (263e-264a). Whatever else the dialectic might mean, it is clear that it presumes to offer an objective and nonverbal perspective that, because it affords the pretense of each, is not a perspective at all but the unblemished vision of reality as it is. In the Phaedrus, Republic, and many places elsewhere in Plato's dialogues, language itself is regarded only as an external and ambiguous element of this means to truth, and otherwise partakes of the demonic, embodying the evil that is found in the power of words put in play in the Sophistical art of argument. The dialectic, then, seeks to make thought dependent on itself alone and to open it to true objects having their ultimate source in the "ideas" of Plato's transcendental realm--and the effects of this belief persist, even if we have long since ceased to believe in Plato's sense of transcendence. In such a case,

we are not only denied access to truth by means of language, but Being itself can be known only from itself, purely and without words--and thereby can be known at all only insofar as we participate in transcendental Being. That's why, after all, Plato gave us souls.

The nature of this perspective compels us to conceive of language as a tool, and a not very reliable one at that, for language assumes a mere sign function and thereby necessarily fails to measure up to the original, the objects to which words are deemed to refer. Here language is simply a matter of "re-presentation," what Heidegger calls "statement." In "statement" the reflexive relationship of logic is stressed, and we are apart from language as a result, functioning in a capacity that is given prior to the perspectives that language yields, all of it rounded off in the belief that we thereby use language, that we subsist as subjects, and all that is apart from ourselves as objects. This attitude toward language is pervasive, and it is patent in the aims of discourse, where our belief that we use language is so assured that we categorize our ways of doing so. In Kinneavy's aims of discourse, or any other traditional techne of rhetoric, we use language in any manner we wish, for as subjects with language at our command, that is not only our prerogative but our function. As this art of rhetoric would seek to place the emphasis on things more important than language, on some prior reality beyond and superior to language that the dialectic postulates, we pretend to speak, as Gadamer says, before a language is there for us to speak (427-8).

I have no quarrel with the idea of classifying discourse. I certainly have none with classification on the basis of aims, Kinneavy's or any others. On the contrary, much is gained by Kinneavy's aims, for they are instrumental in the effort to expand the scope of rhetoric well beyond an

exclusive emphasis on style. Indeed, nothing is lost, as long as we do not neglect, in that effort, the role that language plays in rhetoric. And the matter is particularly compelling when focus is placed on rhetoric, where traditional ideas of rhetorical techne are at odds with what can be termed the hermeneutical imperative or techne. This traditional techne is sustained by two suppositions: the first is that of subjectivism, which has been vented in textbooks and composition theory as the endeavor to "verbalize our consciousness"--most often assumed to be achieved through the expressive aim. That we can perform such a feat is perfectly apropos of the liaison of the rhetorical techne with the dialectic, where the belief that what is intrinsic to ourselves can be expressed extrinsically by virtue of language has seldom been questioned. And the second supposition is that, because we are subjects, language is ours to use as an instrument, for it is the misbegotten issue of some more substantial reality in which we more nobly participate by dint of our immortal souls.

In place of these premises we can begin with one from Gadamer, who claims that everything presupposed in hermeneutics is but language. What this idea provides is an approach to rhetoric that takes sufficient measure of the privileged place and purpose of language in rhetoric, without rhetoric losing its character as an art or techne on that account. It is, moreover, a techne requiring us indeed to be ever mindful of that arena of human endeavor where, as Paul de Man says, "rhetorical mystifications" hold sway.

I have said that the dialectic separates thought from language, but in this context, more grievously yet, it separates thought from Being. Indeed, we tend to see thought as most legitimate the farther it is distanced from Being, for that is the standard of objectivity. In contrast, there is in the hermeneutical perspective a coalition of subject and object that is so critical

as to make it meaningless to speak of them as separate. Rather than fixing our Being as a subject encountering what is separate from itself as an object, and taking its measure in an epistemology that severs thought from Being as its first premise, the hermeneutical perspective is founded on the absence of subject and object, inside and outside, confounding the traditional notion of moving from a prior position of logic to the secondary place of language that has as its singular purpose to get what is inside to the outside. On the contrary, there is an interaction between subject and object (interpreter and interpreted) in the hermeneutical encounter with a text, where subject and text can be conceived as secondary, for they are necessarily grounded in a prior relationship with language, such that the traditional notions of self as stable and static are effaced in the subject's openness to a text. In essence, then, the problem of the aims is not that they are based on the wrong epistemology but that they are based on epistemology at all, for it is the nature of Being rather than of knowledge that is of concern to us here. Perspective betokens ontological status. As Heidegger says, understanding is no longer conceived as a methodological concept but is our very mode of Being, the original character of human Being itself. The ontological emphasis determines the world, so that, whether we see the world from the boulevard or from behind the steering column, there can be no distinction between thinking and being, for they are reciprocal, mutually inclusive. Once again, we are our perspective.

Nietzsche offers one of the more obvious applications of the idea to rhetoric, as he maintains that words do not represent things, but through language we discover and make operative that which works and impresses--which is, of course, another way of saying that all language is rhetorical. Here, language as rhetoric is not concerned with "pure form" but, most

essentially, bears upon the relation of language to the world (and thus to life) through the relation of "linguistic expressions to the specific circumstances in which their use makes sense." The effect of this formulation is to ground rhetoric in language rather than logic, and as rhetoric is the effort "to discover and make operative that which works and impresses" (Nietzsche 885-896), language is elevated, by means of rhetoric, to concerns of relationships among people rather than relegated to relationships among sound, syntax, and meaning--the mere stuff of language as grammar. In Kenneth Burke, this rhetorical basis of language enters as "deflection," meaning to Burke the subversion of the link between sign and meaning that operates within grammatical patterns (de Man 126-7). As a result, we must treat language and experience as completely interdependent, and along with Burke our concern to establish a techne of hermeneutics necessarily begins with an analysis of language rather than reality. In this scheme there is never a correspondence between sign and referent but that a third element always intervenes. It is what Charles Sanders Peirce calls the "interpretant," and what rhetoricians call "people." Here, interpretation is equal to understanding, for the sign must be interpreted if we are to understand the idea that it is to convey, and this is so because the sign is not the thing nor even the meaning derived from the thing, but an interpretation which, in turn, is but another sign. Thus, one sign gives rise to others, and those to others still, in a process that Peirce terms "pure rhetoric." It's like reading the dictionary for meanings to signs and being directed to yet other signs in an endless succession of referral, extension, and deferral.

For this reason language maintains an independence from individual members of the linguistic community, so that it introduces us, as we grow into it, to a particular attitude and relationship with the world. Unlike the

privileged perspective afforded by the dialectic, we cannot see a linguistic world from above, for there is no point of view outside the experience of the world in language from which the world could itself become an object. Indeed, it is language, then, that not only attests to our relationship with the world, but necessarily does so, for the linguistic experience of the world is prior to everything else that is recognized and addressed as being (408-410). We, as subjects, as language "using" beings, are noticeably excluded. As Gadamer says, "Not only is the world 'world' only insofar as it comes into language, but language has its real being only in the fact that the world is re-presented within it" (401). The circle is impenetrable, from within and without, and it is under its influence that the idea of the world as the "prison house of language" is evoked.

Inasmuch as our thinking is our being, and in that language itself attests to this relationship, it is therefore more correct, as Gadamer says, to claim that language speaks us, rather than we speak it (421), for perspective is contingent upon language. And as long as we do not reduce language to logic and grammar--to a mere means to re-present reality--the idea is not so difficult to grasp. We have heard of cases of certain languages having a multiplicity of words for meanings for which we have but one. George Steiner says that there is an African language that has two hundred different words for "camel," and we have all heard that Eskimos have many words with various shades of meaning for "snow." And it's my guess that the Vietnamese have at least as many words for "rice" as either of these languages have for "camel" and "snow." And they have another such word, but here a single word for which we would seem to have many words with many meanings. It is "Xa," and to us it means village, pure and simple--which, pure and simple, it means to the Vietnamese. But here, "village"

means a great deal. In the profoundly elaborate nuances that mark the riches of the Vietnamese language, Xa does indeed mean village. But to assign a mere sign function to the word and thereby think we have the agency to appreciate its meaning is to ignore that language is as creative as it is referential, that it has a life apart from us, from which our own is sustained. Xa means village, but to the Vietnamese peasant it thereby means, in seemingly boundless reference, my home, my family, my wife, my husband, and my children, all my descendents and my ancestors. In Xa, the earth is given precedence, so that Xa is the land and what gives tenure in the land; it is the source of one's identity, as it is the source of life itself. In that perfect coalescence of body and soul, matter and spirit, so utterly foreign to our intellectual temperament, in all instances Xa accounts for the union of culture and nature, designating a social contract that is thereby, most profoundly, a contract with nature as well. That's some of what Xa means to the Vietnamese peasants. And those who aren't Vietnamese and who never fought in their war might say these villages effect a quaint and rustic charm. But some would say that it takes one of those who did, to understand that there's nothing in nature as dire as a Vietnamese village. In the swelter of the dry season, it grows indolent and sunwashed, menacingly upon the land, no different than the parched and twisted foliage in which it is ensconced. And when the rains come, it sags and settles, lies swollen deep amid stagnant bogs and thickets, a wellspring of the war's pestilence, giving off foul smells and a wet heat that rots things so fast they glow in the dark.

You could say that we just didn't get it. Or that we simply didn't speak the language. But in the deepest sense the language didn't speak us--for no other reason than that it wasn't our language, or we weren't its. And if the result can only be seen as more calamitous than any concern arising

from the issue of campus traffic, we can have little patience with those who wish to hear or speak the "true" reality of the Vietnamese village. The only truth that we can know is fixed in the word to the point of disappearance, so that there can be no rising above the word. As there can be can no essential distinction between language and reality, because in this scheme reality itself is very largely a linguistic product in any event. With no pure meanings--no reality aloof from language--then, indeed, as Paul de Man says, rhetoric in its association with this sense of language "radically suspends logic and opens up the vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration" (129).

What remains in this play of language is a sense of Being that is authenticated only by virtue of being comprehended. Xa is the thing that it is because it is comprehended, not cognitively, as we or anyone else could understand Xa to be "village" and nothing else beside in terms of reference and sign function, but comprehended as do the peasants, by their very Being, by encirclement and ingestion, as the etymology of the word "comprehend" suggests. Here more clearly is the substance of the idea that understanding is not a matter of method but primarily of Being, where Being consists, in the end, in being comprehended by language, or to use Heidegger's word, "appropriated" by language. Here is also defined doxa, the medium in which the rhetor does his work, where we can not arbitrarily separate the word from experience, where justification before the critical is displaced by recognition by the faithful. In the mutual implication of subject and object that results, in that arena of "rhetorical mystifications" of which de Man speaks, the subject is best conceived as a process embedded in discourse, circling from perspectives of selfhood to the outside and back again, without objectifying the outside or subjectifying the self. In the context of this

hermeneutic circle, a techne of discourse is in place that allows us to understand the self not in its actuality but in its potentiality and possibility, as Heidegger says. So the point is that this techne specifically pre-empts the rationale for expressive discourse, especially as we understand its purpose as a means to tap the inner depths of the psyche to yield some unique vision of selfhood. Indeed, under the aegis of this techne, all aims of discourse are themselves dynamic and ever-changing, for in any writing activity we undergo an experience with language where the self is never actualized but is a sign itself, an occurrence marking the source of yet another set of possibilities. In this sense, expressive writing is not us expressing ourselves through language, but language expressing itself through us, for language is not our instrument, but we are its--the means through which the world shows itself, though which language expresses itself. On a more practical level, the effect of this techne is that any discourse, regardless of its intended aim, is as apt to achieve (or not achieve) a vision of selfhood as is expressive writing, to include assignments in discursive prose, such as argumentation and the strictly "academic" discourse of the research paper.

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